



For Once In My Life by **christmasinacup**

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Summary: Enzo's on Friday. They earned it.

1. Prologue

I'm in denial and have decided to re-write the end of season 3. Joyce and Hopper DESERVE THIS.

No more than a second after she pulled down with all her strength and turned both keys, Joyce Byers collapsed onto the floor and began to sob. Full body shaking sobs, the kind that took all the energy she had left in her small body.

It wasn't fair.

"Joyce," a voice gasped from behind her. Her head jerked up, certain she was hallucinating. Was she dead too?

Hopper was sitting against the doorway to the machine, slumped over like a drunk. He looked like shit, but he was there.

"Hop?," she wept. "Is that... are you..." She found one last burst of energy to stumble over to him, half crawling. She raised her hand to cup his cheek and felt the scratchy stubble and dried blood. He was there. Covered in dirt and ash and blood and smelling like burnt hair, but alive.

"I... I...", he panted, just above a whisper. "I got... some sort of adrenaline burst, I don't... one minute I was looking at you... and the next I was pulling this door open... shit was exploding behind me."

"Oh my god," she whispered, throwing her arms around him. He winced, but she ignored it. She really thought she was about to have to face El and tell her Hop was gone.

"We gotta get out of here," he murmured gruffly. She nodded, jumping up and wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeve. She extended a hand and pulled him up slowly, due to the fact that he weighed about twice what she did.

"Can you walk?," she asked softly. He nodded, putting his arm across her shoulders.

"Just need a little support," he said, wincing in pain. She put her arm around his side and carefully, they made it out to the hallway. She spotted the little cart they'd driven up in and let out the first sigh of relief in days.

"Thank god."

2. Someone I've Needed For So Long

Friday. He knocked on the door at 6:58pm. The first time he had ever been early in his life, he thought to himself with a chuckle, smoothing his shirt. He made Flo buy him another shirt, since he needed a break from the old one. This one was just pale blue button down, tucked into dark jeans. Nothing crazy.

"What's so funny?," Joyce asked as she swung the door open, making a face at him. It was that scrunched up, silly face she made often without realizing it. It was weird as hell. But he adored it.

"Uhhh, nothin'," he said, momentarily stunned by her big brown eyes. She smiled. He saw that she was wearing a skirt, which he hadn't seen since high school. It was denim and hit just above her knees. She had tucked in a plain white tee shirt that was a little big on her and was wearing shiny black patent leather square-toe ankle boots that looked brand new. Definitely not a shoe she'd wear for a shift at Melvald's.

"Let me just grab my jacket," she said, disappearing into back into the house and leaving the door open.

"Hey," Will said from the couch. Hopper took a step into the house and waved.

"Hey kid," he said. "How's it going?"

"Good," Will said, smiling larger than Hopper had seen in a while. "I created a new campaign for D&D tonight!"

"That's awesome," he said, wishing he knew what the hell Will was talking about. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Really awesome."

"Got it!," Joyce said, reappearing in the living room and waving around a her jacket. She leaned down to kiss Will's cheek.

"Bye sweetie. Have a great campaign. Call if you're going to stay the night at Mike's."

Hopper got up from the couch and followed her towards the door. As soon as they closed the front door, he turned to her.

"What's a campaign?"

"Oh," Joyce laughed. "It's a Dungeons and Dragons thing. Like writing a new set of rules each time."

"Ah," he said, opening the truck door for her. "I've never played."

"Your hair looks good," she said, smiling at him as he closed the door behind her, window still rolled down to make up for the lack of AC in the truck. He leaned on the open window frame and grinned, his hair cropped as close to his head as it could be without anyone pulling out a razor. The mustache had been trimmed, but was still there, along with stubble.

"Oh, you like this? I call it a burn-n'-fix," he joked. "Nancy did it."

Joyce laughed to herself at the image of Nancy trying to fix Hopper's post-explosion hair while he sat on a stool on the veranda of the cabin. The day after all the events that transpired, Joyce shuffled people to and from the makeshift FBI office to give statements and those who had given statements helped clean up the cabin. She could imagine Hop asking which kid had the best chance of giving a decent hair cut and dragging the chosen one, Nancy, outside.

"I really do think it looks good," she said as he buckled his seatbelt and put the car in drive. "Very smooth."

They made small talk all the way to the restaurant, mostly discussing the rebuilding of the mall and mayor Larry Kline's impromptu resignation. It wasn't until their salads came that Joyce brought up the kids.

"So, how is El holding up?," she asked gently. She didn't want to push any buttons, but since the kids never hung out at her house, she hadn't seen the girl for a few days. She felt this strong, protective urge when it came to Eleven. No child should have to suffer the way she had, Joyce thought.

"Better than I expected," he said. "But losing her abilities... I think it's

rougher than she wants to let on."

"I can't even imagine," Joyce murmured.

"She'll get through it, I know she will," he said, a little sadness in his eyes. "Part of me is glad. Maybe it will be easier for her to learn how to be a normal kid now."

Joyce nodded. She felt, as she could tell Hopper did, that El's differences had been a huge weight on her. Adjusting to being a teenager was hard enough without being a party trick, or worrying about losing her temper over something small and blowing out all the lights in her house.

"You know, she asked me to take her to Max's house tonight," he said triumphantly as he stabbed a piece of lettuce with his fork.

"Wow," she said, taking a sip of water. "Nice. I guess that speech we worked out did the trick."

"Oh yeah, about that... I improvised a bit."

She furrowed her brow in that adorable confused way.

"What?"

Laughing, he told her the story. He admitted to acting a little crazy. Okay, a lot. Her eyes widened and she laughed with him, deep belly laughs. She was still chuckling when they ordered dinner.

"My approach, maybe unconventional to you, worked," he said with a grin.

She scoffed. "Not really. You almost broke them up."

"That was the plan."

"You wouldn't have actually wanted it," she reasoned. "No one wants a moody teenage daughter who has just had her heart broken."

A look of horror crossed his face. He hadn't even considered that.

"Oh shit."

Joyce started laughing again.

"Get ready for the rollercoaster, buddy," she said, raising her wine glass. He clinked his glass against hers and sighed before taking several large sips.

"Guess I never thought about what would happen when it got this far," he said, half to himself. Sarah had been so young, he hadn't even started to think about her going to her first school dance or having a crush. He felt a tightness in his throat and washed away the beginnings of tears with more wine.

Joyce smiled softly. "You got this," she said, thinking he was still lost in a moment of "oh-shit-I-have-to-parent-a-teenage-girl" panic. "And I'll help you out."

He raised an eyebrow. "Just don't teach her how to sneak out like you did."

Joyce's eyes widened and she smacked his hand. "Hey!"

He laughed. "You were a hellraiser, don't deny it."

She tilted her head to the side a little and bit her lip. "Yeah. Yeah, I was."

He looked at her face and for a moment, saw the girl he'd become enamored with at first sight in homeroom freshman year. Her cheeks had been a little fuller then, no worry lines by her eyes. Dark black hair from a box, because she wanted to piss her mom off before the first day of school.

She snapped him out of his reverie by mumbling, "You didn't mind when it was your hell I was raising."

He guffawed at that, startling the waiter who was bringing their mood. She stifled a giggle, her eyes flashing with that same look from homeroom. Mischievous and endless possibilities.

xxx

At the end of the meal, he drove her home slowly, not wanting the night to end. It was perfect out - not dark quite yet, and warm with a breeze. The windows were rolled all the way down and Stevie Wonder played softly on the radio.

*"For once I can touch,
What my heart used to dream of,
Long before I knew,
Ohhhhh someone warm like you,
Would make my dreams come true..."*

He pulled into the Byers' driveway and a part of his heart cracked. He didn't want to say goodbye.

Before he could say a word, Joyce rested her hand gently on his arm. "Come in for another drink?"

They brought their drinks to the porch and sat on a bench Jonathan had made last summer in a workshop. It was a little creaky and the stain was patchy, but Joyce had been so proud of him for trying something new that she'd made a huge deal about it.

"Hop," she started, turning to face him. They'd been sipping their drinks in silence for a few moments, neither one knowing how to say the exact right thing.

"I'm sorry about standing you up," she said, looking into his eyes. "I got so distracted and then after everything that happened... I never apologized."

He smiled crookedly. "Thanks. It's okay. You were onto something with those magnets."

"Yeah, but I didn't even stop to think about your feelings," she said fumbling over the words. "I didn't realize... how much it meant to you."

He took her beer from her, set both his and her bottles down on the

ground, and took her hands in his.

"Because I was an asshole about it. I didn't want to be insensitive but I couldn't wait any longer to ask you. So I badgered you to go to dinner with me, even though you were preoccupied."

She shrugged. "I was a little distracted. But I was also... scared." She bit her lip, sort of wishing she could take that one back. She wasn't sure when she wanted to bring up her feelings, but they had to come out some time.

"I acted like I was oblivious when I knew what you really wanted. And I wanted it too, which scared the hell out of me. So I played it off."

His eyes widened a bit. After the ordeal they went through, he knew she didn't only think of him as a friend. He could tell something was there. But he didn't want to get his hopes up.

"Hopper, I..." She had no idea how to say this. She didn't know how to express how grateful she was that he was even alive right now, how much it meant that he'd been there for her since Will disappeared, fighting for her. How he didn't hesitate to put himself in danger to protect her and her boys. How it had hurt when he pulled away after she started seeing Bob, which she now knew was because of El, but still thought had a little bit to do with his feelings for her. He acted tough but she'd always seen right through it. Since high school.

His eyes were gazing into hers, his undivided attention in the palm of her hand. She had no clue what to say.

So instead, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

3. Make My Dreams Come True

He couldn't believe it. He'd been waiting for this moment for so long, and it still took him by surprise. Joyce had kissed him. He kissed back, tenderly at first, trying to play down his excitement.

Don't get carried away just yet, he told himself. They broke apart for just a moment, and he let out a "... oh, wow..." before diving in to kiss her again. It felt so right and natural to have his lips on hers, her arms around his neck.

How can her lips be so soft?, he wondered. She always chewing on them and fretting and tugging on her hair... the same hair his hands were tangled in. Her soft, auburn waves.

Joyce pulled back, sensing that Hopper was distracted. "You okay?"

He saw it on her face. A warm glow of happiness. Well, actually, a cute crinkled nose of confusion. But below that, happiness. Peace. She wasn't anxious or scared anymore. She didn't have a reason to tear her hair out with worry and chew her lip off because she was too nervous to eat.

She wasn't in the dark anymore. The light had come back to Joyce Byers. He selfishly hoped he had something to do with it.

"Just... thinking. 'Bout you. And how amazing you are," he said softly, leaning in to kiss her again. She grinned and kissed him back. He could feel the warmth radiating from her smile.

He was so glad she felt peace again. Last week, when he pulled his ass through that door just in time, he had heard so much pain in her voice. He moved his hands down to rub her back as they kissed, and suddenly felt transported back to that moment. When she held him and he could still feel the aftershocks of her sobbing. She was shaking like a one-woman earthquake.

"Hop?," Joyce pulled away again, a concerned look on her face. "Are you sure you're okay? You're shaking a little bit."

He held his hand out in front of his face and saw it tremble. Damn.

"I was just....," he sighed. "Thinking about turning the keys. That night, it's seared into my memory."

She made one of those caring, loving noises - a gentle murmur - and raised her hand to stroke his cheek.

"Those sobs were....," he swallowed nervously. "I thought I'd never see you again, you know?"

"Sobs?"

"After you pulled the keys - I had just gotten through the door and saw you on the floor. It took me a few seconds to speak, ya know? So I heard you..." he trailed off. He didn't need to say it. The look in her eyes confirmed that she knew what he meant.

"I was thinking, *it's not fair*," Joyce said softly, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. "To you, to El, losing her dad. And to me, because I... I finally knew I..." she wasn't ready to finish that sentence yet.

"Losing Bob, and then you? I don't know what I would have done," she whispered.

"You're strong as hell," he said quietly. "You've been through so much and you're still standing here... you woulda be fine."

She shook her head. "No."

He stroked her hair, then wiped away the few tears that had fallen. "Yes. You would have made it through."

"I didn't want to have be strong anymore," she whispered. "And I was strong because I had you by my side. Without you, I couldn't do any of this."

He sighed. "I disagree."

"Well, how about this?," she said, shifting into his lap. "I wouldn't want to do any of this without you. I wouldn't want to be without

you. I don't want to be strong, I just want to be happy, for once."

"You can be both," he murmured, tucking some hair behind her cheek as she wrapped her arms around his neck again. She leaned forward just enough to brush her nose against his.

"We," she whispered. "We can be both. You've been miserable and strong for a long time too."

"I have been one sorry son of a bitch for a while," he conceded, kissing her neck. He kissed his way up and down the side of her neck for a few minutes before she pulled away to, scooting off the bench and standing up. She held her hand out.

"Come on," she said, a coy smile on her lips. The mischief was back in her eyes. "It's getting dark out."

Right. She wanted to go inside because it was dark. Not because both of them had enough sexual tension and nervous energy built up inside them to launch a fireworks display to rival any other.

Hopper decided it was time to be bold. He got up and grabbed her, swinging her up into his arms and carrying her through the doorway like a bride. He kissed her and didn't stop until they got to her bedroom, where he gently laid her down on the bed. She grabbed for him hungrily, pulling him down on top of her and kissing him like he had oxygen she needed to steal.

"Joyce..." he panted, pulling his lips away from her for only a moment. "Are you..."

She didn't even let him finish before she kissed him again, then sat up on her haunches.

"Yes," she whispered, tugging her t-shirt off to reveal a white lacy bra. "I want you."

He groaned with delight and lunged forward to kiss her again, pushing her backward onto the pillows. He kissed his way down her throat to her chest, past her breasts - as inviting as they were, to her belly button, just above the waistband of her denim skirt. He started to kiss his way back up, all the way to her lips, before sitting up

slightly to pull his shirt over his head. She tried to pull him back down to her, but he just sat above her, looking down at her beautiful, small body. Her skinny wrists and her warm brown eyes and her freckled clavicle. He grinned.

"I love you," he said breathlessly, lowering himself down to kiss her again. Joyce kissed back passionately, and murmured, "I love you too, Hop."

I hope everyone has enjoyed this story so far! I think I'll just do one more chapter.